

APPRAISAL OF THE ORGAN OF ST. JAMES UNITED CHURCH, MONTREAL
WADSWORTH 1891, WARREN 1909, CASAVANT 1938 OPUS 1608

4 September, 2007

Christopher Jackson

St. James United Church is one of Montréal's architectural landmarks. When built it was thought to be the largest Methodist church in North America, a kind of "cathedral" of non-conformist churchmanship located in the heart of the city. Its imposing Gothic revival façade, long hidden behind a row of nondescript office buildings, is now restored and once again presides with great elegance over Montréal's downtown core.

In keeping with the monumental nature of the church building, the organ was from the outset conceived along grandiose lines: three manuals at first, with detached console, and a very imposing case.

Originally the work of Edward Wadsworth of Manchester, England, the instrument was enlarged by S.R. Warren of Toronto in 1909 and completely rebuilt by Casavant in 1938, retaining only the pipework. In 1988 Karl Raudsepp produced a study for the Ministère des Affaires Culturelles which describes in some detail the three principal phases of the organ's evolution with accompanying stoplists. (See Appendix 1) A copy of the original Wadsworth contract (Appendix 2) has been preserved in the United Church Archives, and describes the instrument's tonal and mechanical characteristics. It would appear that the original organ was equipped with slider chests and pneumatic pull-downs, and the original transmission was probably tubular pneumatic. The specification also states that the instrument is to have "three rows of keys governing six distinct organs, and one row of pedal keys governing three pedal organs, each division to be attachable (sic) at pleasure to its own keyboard or pedalboard, either together or separately".

It is interesting to note that Edward Wadsworth is listed in the Lovell Directory for Montréal as an organbuilder between 1887 and 1892. During this time, only one other instrument is known to have been built by them in Canada, for the Anglican Church at Exeter, Ontario. Apart from the revised stoplist, and the payment record of \$6,000.00, there is no documentation of the work carried out by Warren Bros. However, it is likely that this involved electrification of the action since Farnham mentions this in his account of a visit to the organ some years after the Warren restoration.

While the intervention by Casavant in 1938 came at a rather sombre period in the history of North American organbuilding, very little was added to the Warren specification of 1909. In keeping with the practice of the time, new pitman chests were installed and pressures were increased which resulted in some tonal changes, but by and large the unique character of this instrument remains to this day. The Casavant Archives contain several memos and letters between the Church and Stephen Stoot, Casavant's tonal director at the time. Stoot mentions in one letter that the mechanical portion of the instrument could not be restored, but that no changes were to be made to the pipework, and that the original character of the instrument was to be maintained. Further research on the fascinating history of this instrument is underway.

Configuration

The organ is constructed on three levels directly behind the façade with pipework of the Pedal division distributed to the rear and to each side of the manual divisions. The manual divisions speak directly into the sanctuary. The Great division is located on the third level and was originally hidden by thick curtains which were removed some years ago. The console has always been located in its present position.

The façade is typically 19th c. English in design, with a large central bay of speaking Open Diapason basses flanked by two smaller bays. The woodwork of the case is in solid oak, with carvings of floral design recalling some architectural features of the church.

See Karl Raudsepp's report for a complete description of the internal layout.

Assessment of the organ in its present state

Few changes have been made to the 1938 Casavant specification:

- 1956 - replacement of the Vox Humana on the Swell with a Nazard 2 2/3
- 1988 - replacement of the original Great mixtures with a new Mixture IV and Cymbal III
- re-working of Great reeds, cut dead length (slots soldered closed)

The interior of the organ is covered with a thick layer of dust and soot.

While the original pipework is somewhat mixed, the great majority is clearly from the first instrument and of excellent quality. All metal flue stops and most reeds are made of "spotted metal", an alloy of roughly one half tin and one half lead. The pipework of the new mixtures is of inferior quality. All wooden pipework is painted, although it is no doubt made of clear pine as was common practice during this period.

The overall condition of the pipework is good. Some tuning sleeves have been added but many stops remain in their original state either with slots or cut dead length. There are a few damaged pipes, notably in the façade.

The scaling is particularly interesting, generally fairly narrow compared to other local instruments of this vintage, and pipe-walls are also much thinner overall. As suggested by Raudsepp, this organ

merits a full inventory of the pipework when it is cleaned and restored.

Many registers were moved up one-half step in 1938, no doubt to compensate in part for the increased wind pressures. However, it does not appear that many cut-ups were altered.

The structure, chests, reservoirs and windsupply are all of excellent quality in keeping with the high standards set by Casavant throughout its history. There appear to be no major weaknesses (such as cracks due to water damage) either in the supporting structure or in the chests themselves. The organ has received fairly consistent maintenance over the years: all reservoirs, concussion bellows, swell engines, tremulants, and windsupplies from reservoirs to chests have been competently releathered. A sample valve-board from the Great was examined on this visit and the leather burses (or "puffs") show no signs of decomposition, which would indicate that they have probably been releathered within the last two decades. Time did not permit an examination of the primary valves, but given the number of dead notes one would assume that these have not been releathered.

In the late 1980's the coupling mechanism was converted to a digital system.

The two blowers are new (19??) and provide an ample supply of wind. Given their age it was odd to note the presence of duct tape at the joints to prevent leaks.

That this organ has been used extensively over the years is clear from the extremely poor condition of the console. Some releathering of pneumatics has been carried out, but the electrical system is seriously worn, causing many dead notes, stops which do not engage etc. The combination action is also worn out and therefore unreliable, naturally a major problem in an instrument of this size.

Recommendations

1. All of the pipework, windsupply and mechanical portions of the organ should be thoroughly cleaned and adjusted.
2. Where appropriate, components should be releathered, especially the primary valves on manual chests as well as the pedal chest valves. Reservoirs, concussion bellows and sleeves have been recently releathered and should not necessitate any attention in the near future.
3. All pipework and stays should be repaired; façade pipes require special attention in this regard, given the poor condition of their tuning slots.
4. While the Casavant rebuild in 1938 retained all of the original pipework, with few visible alterations, it is clear that the sound of the organ was modified to correspond more closely with the prevailing tonal aesthetic of the time. The result is an instrument somewhat lacking in tonal definition and clarity. The restoration should seek to re-establish the original character of individual stops while re-balancing their various combinations with a view to bringing the instrument back to its late 19th c. colour.
5. A complete inventory of the pipework and its provenance should be carried out during the restoration.
6. The Mixture IV on the Great Organ should be replaced or at the least completely re-configured to be more in keeping with the instrument. The Mixture III is essentially a very high-pitched Cymbale with

repeats at the octave, and is incongruous in this organ. A new plan for the mixtures would lower the overall pitch so that there is a seamless connection with the principal chorus.

7. The reed stops are of English construction and should be studied then restored to their original brilliance.

8. In 1956 Casavant removed the original Vox Humana on the Swell, installing a Nazard 2 2/3 in its place. The latter should be replaced by a new Vox Humana, of English design..

9. The console should be entirely rebuilt and equipped with the latest digital technology, and the organ completely re-wired.

10. The façade pipes were originally very handsomely stencilled as can be seen from the 1982 Notman photograph included with this report (Appendix 3). It is strongly recommended that the façade be restored to its original appearance.

Conclusion

The organ of St. James Church is one of Montreal's most unusual instruments. In spite of a number of significant modifications and rebuilds over the years, it retains its original characteristics and composition. To this day it is used regularly for church services and musical events. Given its significance historically and musically it merits a full restoration.